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Sentimentalism without Relativism

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We are now in the midst of an exciting multidisciplinary revival of work on the moral sentiments. As recently as 1989, a commentator could reasonably write that he knew “of no living author who has thought to call herself a sentimentalist.”¹ The very existence of the present volume is a testament to just how much times have changed. Scholars across philosophy, political science, law and psychology, are now rediscovering that eighteenth-century sentimentalists such as David Hume and Adam Smith were correct to emphasize the centrality of passion and emotion to moral judgment. This work has profound repercussions for how we think about virtually all major questions in ethics, politics and the law, among other fields. But the sentimentalist theory that moral judgments contain emotions actually has very few important, substantive moral implications.

It may sound strange to say that a moral theory may be deeply important without having many important substantive moral implications. By a substantive moral implication of a theory, I mean a concrete normative conclusion which one must draw from it directly on pain of logical contradiction. No further research is necessary, no additional premises need to be posited; anyone who affirms a theory but denies its implications is rationally inconsistent. There are thus many ways that a moral theory can have profound repercussions without having many important substantive moral implications. For one thing, it may have such implications when combined

¹ Joseph Duke Filonowicz, “Ethical Sentimentalism Revisited,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 6:2 (April 1989), pp. 189-206, p. 192. “Most often,” Filonowicz continues, “the term is used polemically and tendentiously to brand vague themes thought to be barely worthy of serious consideration.” The fact that so many scholars today self-identify as sentimentalists is thus not only a remarkably intellectual development, but also a brazen act of linguistic reappropriation. Unfortunately, however, the term “sentimentalist” still retains its mawkish connotations in everyday usage.

with *other* theories—but these are implications of a conjunction of theories, not of any single theory. Taken by itself, a moral theory may also have methodological rather than substantive implications; it may suggest *how* we should conduct future moral inquiries rather than *what* we must conclude. More generally, a theory may be a conversation starter rather than a conversation stopper, suggesting what new questions we should investigate, what new possibilities we should consider, without establishing any new and important conclusions which we must believe. Moral sentimentalism (or just “sentimentalism,” as I will call it) is important in all of these ways.

This essay will focus on what Jesse Prinz and many others have taken to be the most important substantive moral implication of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism is thought to imply moral relativism.² Prinz defends this common view by arguing that, once the truth of sentimentalism is established, we must face the fact that “there may be moral conflicts that have no rational resolution” (p. XX). I think that Prinz is right here; no one can consistently affirm sentimentalism while denying that there may be moral conflicts that have no rational resolution. But I don’t think that anything much further follows from this implication—certainly nothing of particular importance for normative ethics, politics or law, and most certainly not moral relativism. After all, even if our moral conflicts are not capable of rational resolution, they may nonetheless be resolvable through non-rational means. It is my hope that they can be resolved in this way—and my conviction that they should be—that leads me to oppose relativism as both a philosophical theory and as a practical approach to ethics and politics. Yet both Prinz and I are sentimentalists, and our conceptions of what sentimentalism involves are essentially the same.

² See Prinz’s contribution to the present volume, as well as Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

So how is it possible for two consistent defenders of sentimentalism to differ on so much else? It might be thought that some of the room for disagreement comes from the ambiguity of sentimentalism itself. While this is not the primary source of the dispute at hand, I do think that there are some ambiguities in the formulation of sentimentalism which need to be addressed.

I accept Prinz's "constitution model" of sentimentalism, which maintains that moral judgments *contain* emotions, rather than simply being judgments *about* emotions as under many so-called neo- (or, really, quasi-)sentimentalist theories today.³ But even once one accepts the constitution model, important ambiguities remain. The claim that moral judgments contain emotions can be understood as an empirical generalization, a conceptual necessity, or a normative precept. I actually think sentimentalism is probably true in all three of these ways. But philosophers can feel free to embrace one or two while rejecting the other(s).

First, consider descriptive, empirical sentimentalism: the claim that, as a matter of psychological fact, most of our moral judgments can be observed to contain emotions most of the time. Prinz makes a strong case that this empirical generalization is well-supported by recent research in experimental psychology and neuroscience. Yet this descriptive theory, while undoubtedly preferable to its rivals, is nothing new. To the contrary, it has been widely accepted throughout the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, it has been accepted even by most philosophers classified as moral rationalists. And any theory embraced by Plato, the Stoics, Spinoza and Kant, as well as by Hume and Smith, is hardly even deserving of the name sentimentalism.

³ For two prominent examples of such quasi-sentimentalist theories, see Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990 and Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "Sentiment and Value." *Ethics* 110 (2000), pp. 722-748, the latter of which introduced the idea of calling such views "neosentimentalist."

One would be hard-pressed to find a major, canonical moral rationalist who denied that emotions are a component of most of our moral judgments most of the time. Plato would hardly be surprised to see that most experimental subjects are governed by passion rather than reason. Most subjects in experimental psychology are undergraduates, after all, and there is nothing more sophomoric than being governed by one's passions. Yet even if empirical sentimentalism is also true for most of us above the legal drinking age, what allowed Plato to be a rationalist is that he thought that the way most people make most moral judgments most of the time is irrelevant to moral philosophy. He embraced what Prinz, following today's current psychological practice, calls a dual process model. There are two ways moral judgments can be formed, one of which includes emotion and one which does not. The former results in moral opinion, while the latter results in moral knowledge. Knowledge is incomparably superior to opinion, and wields an authority which opinion lacks.⁴ The goal of philosophy is thus to allow us to form judgments on the basis of reason alone. Since only a tiny minority, beneficiaries of either very rare divine gifts or a very particular education (most decidedly not the kind of education available to today's undergraduates), could ever hope to achieve moral knowledge, only they will form moral judgments which do not contain emotion.⁵ For those concerned with empirical generalizations, these philosopher-kings (if any exist at any given time) would be mere outliers. Plato's is not the kind of dual-process model subject to empirical falsification.

⁴ For two of the many Platonic discussions of the superiority of moral knowledge to moral opinion, see *Meno* 97a-100b (In Plato, *Complete Works*, Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, pp. 895-897) and *Republic* 477-480 (pp. 1103-1107).

⁵ For the claim that only a minority will achieve moral knowledge or understanding, see, among many other passages in the Platonic corpus, *Timaeus* 51e (Cooper, ed., p. 1254). The educational plan designed to produce moral knowledge takes up much of the *Republic*; see especially 376-417 (pp. 1015-1052) and 503-541 (pp. 1123-1155).

That said, empirical sentimentalism does imply an empirical version of the claim that not all moral conflicts are capable of rational resolution. As long as the mass of humanity remains stuck in the mire of conflicting passions, and hence conflicting moral opinions, any disagreement with or among them will not be rationally resolvable. In Plato's view, our only hope is that those who are incapable of moral knowledge may come to possess true moral opinions through non-rational means. The rational few must therefore manipulate the passionate many to comply with reason's demands, and must do so through some combination of coercion and deception. This is the ultimate ground of the philosophical elite's right to absolute rule over the non-philosophical masses.⁶

Of course, one need not be an elitist or anti-egalitarian in order to accept sentimentalism as an empirical generalization while nonetheless remaining a rationalist along roughly Platonic lines. Kant, too, had a dual-process model, one which was just as scientifically untestable as Plato's. Here, the distinction between opinion and knowledge is replaced by a distinction between heteronomous and autonomous moral judgment. While heteronomous judgment is the result of empirically observable causal forces—with what Kant called “*Neigung*” (“inclination”) foremost among them—autonomous judgment is the self-legislation of pure, noumenal reason. All rational agents as such are capable of this self-legislation, but even on introspection they can never be sure that they have achieved it. Although an action may clearly be in conformity with duty, we can never be entirely certain it was done from duty, and hence possessed genuine moral

⁶ See, among other defenses of this claim in the *Republic*, 484b-484d (Cooper, ed., pp. 1107-1108). There are, of course, many scholars who would dismiss the interpretation in this and the preceding paragraph as a caricature of Plato's actual views, views which are notoriously difficult to pin down on the basis of literary works as complex as the dialogues. My goal here is not so much to interpret Plato accurately (though, for the record, I do believe my interpretation to be correct) as to describe a recognizably Platonic position which can involve the simultaneous embrace of empirical sentimentalism and moral rationalism

worth. “In fact,” Kant writes, “it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds.”⁷ And just as this knowledge is unavailable to agents themselves, it is also unavailable to outside researchers, even those equipped with fMRIs. Kant acknowledges that, because all moral judgments manifest themselves as empirical phenomena, they will certainly appear to be heteronomously determined. And as long as humanity remains made of crooked timber, this appearance is accurate for most of us most of the time. But the possibility of rational autonomy remains, and it is incumbent upon all of us to strive to achieve it.⁸

Although rationalists can grant that emotion really is a component of most of our moral judgments most of the time, they maintain that a different kind of moral judgment, one free of emotion, is both possible and normatively superior. Sentimentalism, to be worthy of the name, must rule this out. There are two paths available: Sentimentalists can either deny the *possibility* of purely rational moral judgment, or they can deny its *normative superiority*. Either way, sentimentalism cannot simply be an empirical theory.

Let’s examine the conceptual path first. Here is hardly the place to rehash the reasons why the impossibility of a phenomenon cannot be established on empirical grounds alone. Even if this claim is not true universally, one is hard-pressed to imagine what sort of scientific research

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Translated by Mary J. Gregor in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Translated and Edited by Mary J. Gregor. General Introduction by Allen Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 4:407, p. 61.

⁸ My interpretation of Kant in this paragraph, while not obvious to every reader of the *Groundwork*, is reflective of the current scholarly consensus on the matter. See Allen Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 17-49; Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 335-393; and Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995. pp. 146-187. As with my interpretation of Plato, however, my goal here is primarily to outline a recognizably Kantian position which incorporates both empirical sentimentalism and moral rationalism, and which does so without the objectionable elitism of the Platonic position described earlier.

could be conducted to rule out the sort of purely rational moral judgment that Plato and Kant describe. Most twentieth-century anti-rationalists therefore sought to rule out this possibility on conceptual grounds. The claim that moral judgment contains emotion is, they claimed, implicit in the very idea of morality itself, and can be established using the armchair techniques of conceptual analysis.⁹ I think they were probably right, but, the literature on the matter has grown so baroque over the past century, and my skills as an analytic philosopher are so limited, that I remain unsure.

Fortunately, the separate path of normative sentimentalism is also available. If conceptual sentimentalism were true, then one of its implications would be normative sentimentalism. Since ought implies can, if purely rational moral judgments are a contradiction in terms, then it cannot be our duty to pursue them. But normative sentimentalism can also be established independently of its conceptual cousin. Even if purely rational moral judgments were possible, there is no reason to believe that they would be superior to judgments containing emotions. Or, more modestly, even if they might be possible for some sort of conceivable rational being, they are not the sort of judgments we should ever attempt. Adam Smith suggests as much when he notes that the kinds of moral judgments which might be appropriate for God to make are not appropriate for creatures such as ourselves.¹⁰ Given the independence of normative from conceptual sentimentalism, twentieth-century analytic metaethicists did sentimentalism a real disservice by focusing almost exclusively on moral concepts and moral language.

⁹ For the classic statements of metaethical sentimentalism in its “emotivist” variant see Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). New York: Dover Publications, 1952, Ch. 6 (pp. 102-119) and Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944/1960.

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.. Edited by A. L. Macfie and D. D Raphael. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1759/1790/1984, III.5.7, p. 166.

It might be easy to confuse my claim that sentimentalism has no important ethical or political implications with the widespread (if nonetheless controversial) view that metaethics is separate from normative ethics.¹¹ Yet normative sentimentalism is itself a matter of moral judgments, albeit ones about general psychological processes rather than specific substantive ethical or political issues. The sharp distinction between conceptual metaethics and normative ethics was unknown to the original sentimentalists of the Enlightenment era, and need play no role in the revival of sentimentalism today.

There were, admittedly, rough analogues to the current distinction between metaethics and normative ethics in eighteenth-century philosophy. The seventh and final part of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*—one of the first modern historical surveys of Western moral philosophy—begins by observing that there are two questions to be considered when examining the principles of morals. “First, wherein does virtue consist? ... And, secondly, by what power or faculty of the mind is it that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us?”¹² It might be thought that the first of these is the Enlightenment-era equivalent of normative ethics, while the

¹¹ The first half of the twentieth century was the heyday of the belief in the moral neutrality of metaethics, a position defended by Stevenson and Ayer (op. cit.) among many others. By the 1960s, the dominant view had a number of prominent opponents; see Alan Gewirth, “Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics,” *Mind* New Series 69:274 (April 1960), pp. 187-205; Gewirth, “Metaethics and Moral Neutrality,” *Ethics* 78:3 (April 1968), pp. 214-225; and R. C. Solomon, “Normative and Meta-Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 31:1 (September 1970), pp. 97-107. In order to appreciate the full importance of this debate, remember that Stevenson, Ayer and their ilk maintained that only analytic metaethics really qualified as moral *philosophy*, and hence that philosophy as such should not be concerned with normative questions. Those who rejected the moral neutrality of metaethics were thus implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) defending the philosophical legitimacy of addressing normative issues. Given the re-emergence of normative moral and political philosophy from the 1970s onward, it might be thought that Gewirth and Solomon had decisively won the argument. Yet a widespread belief in the independence of metaethics and normative ethics remained—albeit now as a defense of a division of labor between two forms of philosophically legitimate enquiry. Indeed, in a reverse of the once-dominant view, some philosophers even began appealing to the moral neutrality of metaethics to argue that only normative ethics was truly worthy of philosophical attention; see Peter Singer, “The Triviality of the Debate over ‘Is-Ought’ and the Definition of ‘Moral,’” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10:1 (January 1973), pp. 51-56.

¹² Smith, op. cit., VII.1.2, p. 265.

second is equivalent to metaethics, especially since Smith maintains that the second question, taken in isolation, “though of the greatest importance in speculation, is of none in practice.”¹³ I will deal at the conclusion of this essay with Smith’s insistence that this question is of only speculative importance. For now, though, it is important to note that this is an empirical and psychological question, not a conceptual or linguistic one. Smith divided moral philosophy into descriptive moral psychology on the one hand and a form of virtue-theoretic normative ethics on the other, with little place left for the analysis of moral concepts.

Although Smith has been largely neglected by recent analytic metaethicists, Hume has not been so fortunate. Countless analytic commentators have written under the assumption that Hume must have intended to give something resembling an analysis of moral concepts. Given the superficial absence of such an analysis from his ethical writings, they conclude that it must be lurking somewhere implicitly. Many inconsistent analyses have been proposed. As Michael Slote recounts, Hume has been read as a subjectivist descriptivist (“x is right” means “I approve of x”), an expressivist emotivist, (“Hurray for x!”), an ideal observer theorist (“a precisely specified perfect spectator would approve of x”), a projectivist error theorist (our approval of x lead us to assert falsely that it has a property of goodness which it does not actually possess) and, in Slote’s innovation, possibly even a proto-Kripkean reference-fixing theorist (a position too complicated to explain here). Although all these metaethical theories can be categorized as sentimentalists, they are all inconsistent with one another. Slote believes all can be put forward as plausible interpretations of Hume, but concludes that “if one wants to be more consistent than

¹³ Ibid., VII.iii.intro.3, p. 315.

Hume seems to have been, then one has to decide among these theories or advocate some different sentimental account.”¹⁴

Yet there is another option open to sentimentalists: to avoid conceptual sentimentalism entirely, and to defend their theory on empirical and normative grounds alone. If this is indeed the path that Hume chose, it should come as no surprise that attempts to wrestle a consistent analysis of moral concepts from the pages of Hume’s *Treatise* have led Slote and others to reject Hume as metaethically confused and inconsistent. The same would be true of any author who was simply uninterested in analytic metaethics as it is practiced today.

There are many ways to defend normative sentimentalism without relying on conceptual sentimentalism. First, normative sentimentalists may simply determine that the sort of moral judgments that most of us make most of the time are pretty much fine as they are. Such sentimentalists embrace a single rather than a dual process model, claiming that all of us make moral judgments more or less the same way, and that no better alternatives are available. One might take this a step further, and claim that when these everyday moral judgments come into conflict with one another—as they undeniably do with remarkable frequency—we should not conclude that one is morally right and the other is morally wrong. All moral sentiments are morally fine for those who feel them; one moral opinion is as morally good as any other.¹⁵

This universal approval of everyone’s moral sentiments is the normative position which I think is most deserving of the label “moral relativism,” although the term has also been used to

¹⁴ Michael Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 47-48.

¹⁵ Prinz (2007, op. cit.) maintains that this view, but holds open the possibility that some moral sentiments may be better than others in various non-moral ways. Some may be more likely to promote the general welfare than others, for example, but this is not grounds for arguing for their moral superiority as such. Since most of us believe that advancing the general welfare is (at least *ceteris paribus*) *morally* desirable, I fail to see how he can distinguish moral approval and disapproval from their non-moral variants in this way.

identify a number of other normative views, as well as a variety of theories in conceptual metaethics.¹⁶ As with normative sentimentalism, normative relativism can be defended either via appeal to or independent of its conceptual variant. If moral claims really are claims that are true or false only relative to some feature of the claimant, then it would be wrong to conclude that apparently conflicting claims made by different individuals are actually in conflict. It could then be argued that resolving the apparent conflict between them would then be impossible, for there might not actually be any conflict to resolve.¹⁷ Yet even if it were possible, such resolution might still be normatively undesirable—perhaps because moral conflict is something which ought to be tolerated, or even celebrated, rather than resolved away.

As I have already made clear, however, normative relativism is not an implication of sentimentalism. This is because even normative sentimentalism is fully compatible with a kind of dual process model, one not all that different from the Platonic opinion/knowledge model or the Kantian heteronomy/autonomy model. Regardless of how most of us make moral judgments most of the time, sentimentalists like Hume and Smith believe that we can do better. In this respect, they are no different from Plato or Kant. But they flesh out this dual-process model in a distinctly sentimentalist way.¹⁸

¹⁶ For an examination of some of the many possible theories which could reasonably go under the name “moral relativism,” as well as a defense of most (but not all) of them, see the essays collected in “Part I: Moral Relativism,” in Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 3-99.

¹⁷ There are, however, legitimate doubts about the validity of this argument, as well as all other arguments from conceptual to normative relativism. It is certainly possible that there is a disanalogy here between the relationship between conceptual and normative sentimentalism on the one hand, and conceptual and normative relativism on the other. While conceptual sentimentalism implies normative sentimentalism, conceptual relativism may or may not imply normative relativism—and there is no need to determine whether or not it does for purposes of this essay.

¹⁸ This sentimentalist account of how we can improve our moral reflection is one of the main subjects addressed in my book *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. It was

As Prinz makes clear, the two main moral sentiments are those of moral approval and disapproval. As he also observes, these sentiments can be self- as well as other-directed. Inherent in feeling a sentiment of self-disapproval is a sense that we are not doing what we ought to be doing, that we can do better. What Prinz fails to mention explicitly is that among the behaviors which can be subject to both self- and other-disapproval are our feelings of approval and disapproval themselves. But I do think this is the best way to make sense of the case he describes of the recovering homophobe, in which “a bigoted automatic appraisal” that homosexuality is wrong is “outweighed by a considered appeal” that it is not, and in which the agent “identifies with the latter conviction” (p. XX). In other words, the recovering homophobe disapproves of his own disapproval of homosexuality, but has only partially completed the process of purging this wayward moral sentiment from his psyche.

Every moral sentiment we feel is a possible candidate for such disapproval, including the higher-order sentiments which approve or disapprove of our lower-order ones. This raises the possibility of an open-ended process of moral self-scrutiny, in which our moral sentiments are continually turned against themselves.¹⁹ Other mental faculties—reason included—may play a role in this reflective process as well. Despite Hume’s famous bit of rhetoric about enslaving reason to the passions,²⁰ it is clear that this reflection is to be carried out in a non-hierarchical, psychologically holistic way. Although philosophers may rightly distinguish the operations of the mind from another, Hume consistently maintains that in reality they are “uncompounded and

not until I was preparing the current essay, however, that I realized Hume and Smith were advocating a dual-process model along roughly Platonic lines.

¹⁹ This is the moral component of the “progress of sentiments” described by Hume and made famous by Annette Baier in her book of that title. See Annette C. Baier, *Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

²⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739-1740 Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford Philosophical Texts. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 2.3.3.4, p. 266.

inseparable.”²¹ As a result, reason is neither privileged over nor really enslaved to sentiment, nor are higher-order sentiments privileged over lower-order ones. Our goal is a mind fully in harmony with itself, free from psychic conflict in any form.

Although we can never reach a point when we possess certain, objective moral truths, we can reach a reflective equilibrium in which we can affirm that all our moral sentiments have been thoroughly tested. Such a progress of sentiments genuinely replaces moral opinion with a kind of moral knowledge. Yet as George Marcus observes in his contribution to this volume, “knowledge takes many forms” (p. XX). The sort of sentimentalist moral knowledge I want to defend is provisional rather than certain, and directed inward into the contingent makeup of the human psyche rather than outward into a non-contingent realm of moral reality—a realm of Platonic forms or necessary moral laws or what have you.²²

The sentimentalist reflective process described by Hume and Smith also involves a proto-Kantian move from heteronomy to autonomy. Only through such a progress of sentiments can we take control of our moral lives. We consciously identify only with those moral sentiments which we can still endorse even after the greatest degree of critical self-reflection. What makes this view sentimentalist, however, is that these autonomous moral judgments contain emotion as surely as do heteronomous judgments.

But the relevant progress of sentiments is not merely a matter of individual reflection, of self-directed approval and disapproval. It is also a matter of interpersonal evaluation. For better or worse, we approve and disapprove of others’ moral sentiments even more readily than we do

²¹ Ibid., 3.2.2.14, p. 317.

²² For more on the distinction between these two forms of moral knowledge, see Michael B. Gill, “On the Alleged Incompatibility Between Sentimentalism and Moral Confidence,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15:4 (October 1998), pp. 411-440, especially p. 428.

of our own. To be sure, there is nothing in sentimentalism which precludes relativists from approving of moral judgments at odds with their own. But most of us do not share their sentiments. Most of us are inclined to disapprove of judgments which we do not share. Will this disapproval survive the process of reflective self-correction that I just described? To some degree, I think it probably will. But it will not emerge at the end of the reflective process unchallenged or unchanged.

The primary challenge to our disapproval of others' moral sentiments will come from sympathy or empathy.²³ Prinz departs from his Enlightenment-era forbearers quite strikingly by rejecting their contention that sympathy is central to the psychological etiology of all our moral sentiments. We can bracket this general claim for purposes of this essay, however. Whatever role sympathy may play with regard to our moral sentiments generally, it certainly can play a role in helping improve our judgments of the moral sentiments of others, particularly those from cultural traditions in which moral sentiments very different from our own predominate.

It is not that encountering alien moral views will necessarily lead us to empathize with those who advocate them. Far from it; fear and hatred are more common accompaniments to our disapproval of others' moral judgments. If those holding alien worldviews are kept far from us, and do not affect our ability to live according to our own sentiments, these negative emotions will likely mellow into cold indifference. None of these attitudes are conducive to sympathy or empathy. But if we must interact on a daily basis with those of whom we disapprove—if we

²³ For purposes of this essay, I can avoid the question of what difference, if any there is between sympathy and empathy, in part since only the former was available to the eighteenth-century authors who initiated sentimentalism. But do see, among others on the topic, Stephen Darwall, "Empathy, Sympathy, Care," *Philosophical Studies*. 89 (1998), pp. 261-282.

must build a common political life together—then there will be a desperate need for some way of accommodating each other.

Here, Herder is a much better eighteenth-century inspiration than Hume or Smith.²⁴ It was Herder who began the sort of inquiry into the origins of human moral sentiments which Nietzsche would later call genealogy. But while Nietzsche sought to debunk our moral commitments by revealing their ignoble origins, Herder sought to affirm most of the diverse moral sentiments he discovered across human cultures. The key, he argued, is to feel your way into the position of those whose histories and cultures, and hence whose judgments, are different from your own. Herder urges his readers to “go into the age, the clime, the whole history. Feel yourself into everything; only now are you on the way toward understanding...”²⁵

The task is not easy; we must overcome the natural biases of our sympathy, which tend to be strongest for those closest to and most like us, and weakest for those who are different or distant or both. Difficult, yes, but not impossible; Herder maintained that our natural wonder and curiosity at the range of human diversity would be sufficient to motivate the hard emotional work required. Add to this humanistic impetus the practical goal of finding a mode of mutual accommodation in a culturally (and hence also morally) diverse society—a practical goal which Herder did not consider adequately, largely because he was an adamant advocate of culturally uniform nation-states—and there is good reason to believe that many of us will at least attempt to empathize with our fellow citizens when we find ourselves in moral disagreement with them.

²⁴ For a fuller defense of the interpretation of Herder presented in the following paragraphs see *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*, op. cit., Chapter 6, pp. 139-167.

²⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Education of Humanity* (1774), In Michael N. Forster, Translator and Editor, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 292.

Through this imaginative and emotional investigation, you may come to understand that sentiments which once seemed to be strange and unnatural actually speak to human needs and feelings analogous to your own. This, in turn, may change your disapproval into approval. Herder's empathy may therefore look like another path to normative moral relativism. Indeed, many have interpreted Herder in precisely that way.²⁶ But to understand all is not to approve of all. What is more, disapproval which remains once empathetic understanding is achieved seems likely to pass the test of sentimental reflection. The result is not relativism but value pluralism; there is a range of incompatible human values which can all be approved of, but there are also others which cannot be. This, at least, was the lesson Isaiah Berlin took from Herder.²⁷

But there is another possibility still. Someone who arrives at value pluralism via a sentimentalist path—as opposed to someone who is convinced that the plurality of values is rationally demonstrable—realizes that, like all moral knowledge, this pluralism can only be known provisionally. There is always the possibility that with greater sentimental reflection on the part of all parties concerned all of humanity will gradually converge on a single set of universal moral sentiments. This may seem improbable when it comes to standards of personal virtue, but there is a reasonable hope that it may be achieved when it comes to political justice. While Herder approved of many cultural differences, he also approved of a universal sentiment of justice based on our shared humanity and our love of reciprocity. As is well known, some version of the golden rule is present in all known human cultures, even if it is more honored in

²⁶ For a few of the many descriptions of Herder as a relativist along roughly these lines, see Robert T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955, p. 320; Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 142-143; and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1948, p. 172.

²⁷ See Isaiah Berlin *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, especially p. 76, as well as Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Incorporating *Vico and Herder* (1960) and *The Magus of the North* (1993). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

the breach than the observance.²⁸ Herder believed that, given sufficient intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal deliberation, all would eventually come to embrace this humane ideal more fully, whatever their cultural background. “The law of reciprocity,” he insists, “is foreign to no nation.”²⁹

We will never be able to resolve all our moral disagreements on the basis of a single faculty of reason which all human beings share. But we may be able to resolve many, if perhaps not all, of our moral disagreements on the basis of other features we all share—most notably our susceptibility to emotions from physical pain to parental love, and our ability to understand and share the emotions of others. It is this, Herderian vision of sentimental consensus-building which I, for one, would like to see advanced in our moral, political and legal practices. But the ethics and politics of empathetic universalism are not implied by sentimentalism itself, anymore than the ethics and politics of relativism are so implied.

The fact that sentimentalism can consistently be used to defend such different worldviews should come as no surprise. After all, if sentimentalism is true, the ethical and political convictions of rival sentimentalists contain emotions as surely as do all other moral judgments. The differences among their views therefore may not be resolvable through purely rational means. When we speak of the implications of sentimentalism, we are seeking exactly such a rational resolution—a logical deduction, from the shared premise of sentimentalism, which will demonstrate why one sentimentalist view is consistent and the other is inconsistent. A more promising approach would be to resolve disputes between sentimentalists in a sentimentalist manner—such as through greater empathetic inquiry into our interlocutors’ perspectives, and

²⁸ See Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

²⁹ Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1793-7), in Forster, op. cit., p. 417.

greater reflective scrutiny of our own disapproval of their views. In adopting this approach, however, we must give up the idea that our interlocutors somehow failed to notice the direct normative implications of the premises we have in common. Nothing could be farther from the spirit of sentimentalism than dismissing moral worldviews with which we disagree as necessarily incoherent, let alone condemning those who embrace them as necessarily irrational.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why the debate among the original sentimentalists of the Enlightenment era was such a marvelous model of philosophical civility. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, Herder and others at the time were united in their conviction that moral judgments contain emotions, but divided on most other moral and political questions—from the proper place of religion in public life to the viability of democracy to the alleged superiority of European over so-called “primitive” peoples. But Smith’s disagreements with Hume, or Herder’s disagreements with them both, did nothing to lessen their admiration for each other.

Smith was therefore wrong to deny the practical importance of moral psychology. To be sure, sentimentalism has no distinctive position on the question of moral relativism versus moral universalism, let alone on more specific issues like the proper level of progressivity in our tax system or the proper balance between the claims of individual liberty and those of collective security. But, in its normative form, sentimentalism can offer a distinctive position on how we ought to reflect individually, and deliberate collectively, on these and all other such difficult moral questions. Sentimentalism need not unleash hateful, unreflective emotions in our public discourse—or even relativist, tolerant indifference. A widespread embrace of specifically Herderian sentimentalism could instead lead to a cultivation of wide-ranging public empathy,

and might help in the often seemingly fruitless task of rendering our civil life more worthy of the name “civil.”

Pointing out the practical importance of sentimentalism does not detract from its importance for what Smith calls “speculation.” Sentimentalism may also have profound importance for scholars, for philosophy understood in the eighteenth-century sense to include not only the normative and conceptual work which is today the responsibility of philosophers and political theorists, but also the empirical and interpretive scholarship which is now undertaken under the rubrics of the sciences and humanities.

The humanities in particular must not be neglected as a potential resource for enriching sentimentalist thought. Rightly dissatisfied with the arid conceptual analysis which came to dominate philosophy in the twentieth century, philosophers today have sought to bring their work in closer contact with empirical reality. Yet, for too many of them, the turn to reality has taken a detour through the experimental neuropsychology lab. Many recent empirical sentimentalists have believed this scientific approach to be in keeping with the spirit of Hume, who famously introduced his *Treatise* as “an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.”³⁰ Yet rather than using the term “experiment” to describe the controlled tests of today’s laboratory science, Hume instead associates “careful and exact experiments” with the simple “observation of those particular effects which result from... different circumstances and situations.”³¹ If experimentation in general is to be equated with careful observation, in the case of “moral subjects” experimentation will merely involve close

³⁰ Hume, op. cit., Title Page, p. 1. For an experimental philosophy “manifesto” and a collection of essays on the topic, see Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols, eds. *Experimental Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. For a more balanced appraisal of the value of experimental work in the field, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

³¹ Hume, op. cit., Introduction:8, p. 5.

observation of the operations of the social world around us and the psychological forces within us. For Hume, who was most famous in his own time as a historian and an essayist, these observations were not to be conducted in the laboratory under controlled conditions, but in the uncontrolled reality of human life, a reality that can only be captured in history and literature. Although controlled experimentation will always be invaluable in moral psychology—as it is in so many other fields—there is no reason to privilege it over humanistic inquiry when investigating the nature of human sentiments.

Although (at least in my preferred version) sentimentalism is already a normative theory, the need for a humanistic version of sentimentalism is especially great when we turn from general normative conclusions about the proper place of emotion in moral judgment to specific ethical or political issues. Since sentimentalism implies that our disagreements on these issues may not always be resolvable by rational means alone, it might be taken to imply that rational scholarship has little or nothing to contribute to the resolution of these disputes. Alternately, however, a sentimentalist can consistently maintain that scholars can and should continue to write on particular normative questions. To do so effectively, however, they must not be afraid of employing modes of thought other than pure reasoning. Here, too, Herder can serve as a model: His condemnation of European imperialism and insistence on cultural diversity is not the product of mere logical argument, but rests on an understanding of human difference built from his extensive studies of comparative literature, world history, comparative religion and all the other fields of humanistic scholarship—fields which require imaginative insight and emotional sensitivity as much as they require sound reasoning and solid empirical evidence.³² As we

³² Herder's utilization and defense of the humanities has important parallels with that put forward more recently by Martha Nussbaum. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997 and Nussbaum, *Not for*

emerge out of an era in which philosophy was reduced to applied logic—the more formal the better—and into an age in which experimental science stands alongside a priori argumentation as a means of attaining philosophical insight, Herder reminds us that a third, emotionally-laden mode of philosophizing is available, and is capable of establishing the truth of substantive ethical and political conclusions. In many cases, it may be the only effective means of doing so.

An appreciation that moral philosophy and political theory are emotional as well as intellectual work could potentially lead to profound changes in the practice of these disciplines. The full revolutionary potential of sentimentalism will be apparent, however, only when we realize that the importance of a moral theory can have no correlation whatsoever with the importance of its substantive moral implications.

Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.